

Glenda Wiles

From: Joel Webster [websterjoel@hotmail.com]
Sent: Wednesday, January 30, 2008 10:34 PM
To: dbull@fs.fed.us; comments-northern-bitterroot@fs.fed.us; Glenda Wiles
Subject: A Sportsmans Bitterroot NF Travel Planning Comments
Attachments: BNF TMP Comments Submitted Via Email.doc

Also attached

Submitted Via Email

Jan. 30, 2008

To:

Dave Bull Bitterroot NF Supervisor

Ravalli County Commissioners

Dan Ritter Stevensville District Ranger

RE: COMMENTS BITTERROOT NF TRAVEL MANAGEMENT PLAN

Dear Ravalli Commissioners, Supervisor Bull, and BRNDistrict Rangers,

I first want to thank you for going through the steps necessary in developing a travel management plan. Giving the growing use of Off-Road Vehicles, travel management is an issue that in retrospect we should have dealt with back in the early 90's, but I understand why we haven't and am thankful that travel management maps will clarify the growing debate about where motorized vehicles can legally travel.

Let me make clear that I am an active member of Montana's hunting and fishing community. I have been pursuing fish and game since I was first legally able and plan to do so as long as I can. We still have a real treasure in Montana that most other states can only remember through the stories of oldtimers who were privileged enough to experience the vast western forests in other states before they were heavily roaded and broken up into slivers of habitat. You have the ability to maintain that Montana treasure through a smart travel management plan and I ask you to do so.

I hunt over 40 days a year and fish an additional 30 days per year. When I'm not working or spending time with family, I'm in the field. The Bitterroot National Forest is an area that I hunt and fish in often.

Responsibilities that go with the Budget

I wish the national forest system received increasing budgets, not shrinking budgets. Your responsibility as a public agency is extremely important for the American people and I appreciate much of what you do. However, the current shrinking budget carries with it a responsibility to ensure that the road and motorized trail system does not get out of control of the agencies ability to maintain them.

As a sportsman, I want to see roads provide me with access to the national forest. I especially need access points to get me to the places where I can park my truck and walk in. However, there isn't the money to maintain all the roads and the expectation that we can maintain all the roads and trails is unreasonable.

What instead needs to happen is the forest needs to realize how much of the Bitterroot road system and motorized trails it can maintain and then identify the roads and trails that are most important in providing public access to the forest. Maintenance dollars should then be focused at upkeeping that road and motorized trail system into the long term future. If nonprofit groups can help maintain areas, then the miles of roads and trails open should increase. What needs to be avoided is an open road and motorized trail system that continues to decline to a point where water quality begins to suffer. Our water and fisheries are too important to anglers, ranchers, and the residents of the Bitterroot valley for drinking to go to waste because we are too stubborn to realize the limitations of our budgets. It is time for some fiscal responsibility and I hope that you consider my words seriously instead of just letting things continue to deteriorate in condition and escalate as a problem to our natural resources.

Some people may want more motorized use, but the money isn't there to provide it. We can actually afford less access than we currently have. I can't afford everything I want and certain individuals within the public shouldn't

expect to have everything from the public lands that they want— especially if their wishes can not be afforded by the agency. The agency has a fiscal responsibility to maintain a road and trail system that they can afford, letting the system erode into our rivers is simply irresponsible.

While I'm sure you have this information, here are some figures of the current problem. There are 32,000 miles of classified roads on national forest land in Montana and a \$558 million road maintenance backlog. Of those roads, 2,581 miles are located in the Bitterroot National Forest, of which the forest was able to maintain 790 miles in 2005. With \$3,039,000 needed each year to maintain the roads and a declining annual budget that was down to \$568,000 in 2006, the Bitterroot national forest has a responsibility to use the money wisely. supportFootnotes]-->[]<!--[endif]-->.

Darby District

I hunt turkeys up the west fork of the Bitterroot and east of Darby on Forest Service land. While I sure love this area, I am disgusted by the rampant disrespect that people seem to have for this landscape north of where the West fork enters the valley. I've hunted along the east face of the Bitterroot Mountains up past Darby. I've never seen such a maze of user created roads or a waste of a piece of public land that has so much to offer in terms of quality hiking, camping, or hunting. Sure, folks need places to travel to access the forests, but that doesn't give anyone the right to drive wherever they please and create new roads at their own will. Those user created routes have ruined the hunting in the area because people can drive wherever they please. I think these user created roads need to be closed and people who abuse the law need to be punished.

I also do a fair amount of elk hunting in the Sapphire Mountains in the Darby district. I understand the relationship between motorized vehicles and how they reduce habitat security and the quality of hunting and put some miles under my feet to get away from all the vehicles so I can get into some good hunting. I have hunted a lot in the Sleeping Child IRA and helped a friend pack out a nice 5 point bull elk this year - five miles on my back. This has turned into great elk country after that burn a while back and I ask that you prevent any motorized vehicles from being allowed in this area during the summer. I appreciate motorized access to the edge of the roadless area, but cutting 4 wheeler trails into this area will only decrease the quality of hunting and the function of the area's habitat security. People have enough places to ride and this area should be off limits.

Same goes for the Sapphire Inventoried Roadless Area – please keep the motorized vehicles out of this area. I almost took a nice bull this season in this IRA and saw a nice bull moose and some good mule deer too. Again, motorized vehicles reduce habitat security for big game animals, cause problems to the bull to cow ratio, and flat out reduce the quality of the hunting experience. I want access to the area, but feel the place needs to be open to nonmotorized use so the hunting stays good.

Also, my hunt this year took me into the Sapphire WSA this year and I thought the country was great. I love the divide and plan to spend more time in this area. WSA's should be nonmechanized so there aren't a bunch of issues if the area is to become wilderness sometime down the road. This area should not even have mountain bikes.

Stevensville District

I've spent a fair bit of time in the Stony Mountain inventoried roadless area during big game season over the last several seasons. While the weather made hunting different this year, the Stony Mountain IRA has some good hunting. Nice mule deer bucks and a good elk herd. I killed a cow in this area during the 2006 season. Again, access to the area is great, but motors do not need to go through the area. This is a choice backcountry hunting area that is close to Missoula and Bitterroot population centers. As the population of the valleys continues to grow, places like Stony Mountain will become ever more important as the last bastions of hunting areas where a fella can still get away from the crowds and maybe bump into a nice buck or bull.

I've done a little hiking in the Lolo Creek IRA and see it as an important buffer between the Wilderness and the valley and roaded forestlands. This is good hunting country and I'd like to see it be nonmotorized. There is some good water that comes out of this area, which is important for the Bitterroot River fishery, a place where I've spent many a Saturday afternoon. Motorized routes are associated with increased erosion from runoff – we don't need that silt in our rivers.

Sula District

Anybody who elk hunts knows that the Swift Creek, Needle Creek, North Big Hole, and Tolan Creek IRAs are incredible big game habitat. Every year hunters who head for unit 270 are counting on those backcountry elk getting pushed down into the lower elevations. A number of friends of mine have taken some real nice elk out of this country. Motorized routes in these IRAs are bad news. These areas need to be nonmotorized so the elk herd can remain strong and the bucks and bulls can keep growing big. Also, this is such an important area for clean water. I don't know if you guys have fished that country, but the Cutthroat trout are impressive and increased siltation from motorized use will spoil this place. This area needs to be off limits to motorized use.

West Fork District

Like I said earlier in this letter, I've done a fair amount of fishing and turkey hunting up the West Fork area of the Bitterroot. While the turkey hunting might be best in the heavily managed areas, the West Fork of the Bitterroot backcountry areas have some of the most spectacular views in Montana. The Blue Joint WSA has some good Bighorn sheep, elk, and mule deer. I haven't spent a lot of time in this area, but I understand its importance to our outdoor heritage. Since this is a WSA, it should be managed as such. No motorized use and no mechanized use should be allowed in the Blue Joint.

I have never been in the Alan Mountain roadless area, but it is on my list of areas to explore. I have, however, heard that this area has become overrun with ATVs and dirt bikes. Off road vehicles have no place in the backcountry. If motorized users want backcountry riding experiences, I encourage you to take my above advice and begin working on a roads to trails system to accommodate their needs and wishes while practicing fiscal responsibility.

Enforcement

The Bitterroot National forest needs to show a commitment to enforcing their travel management plan. This can be done by working with the hunting and fishing community and I would be happy to help establish a partnership enforcement system. However, part of the problems we are currently facing are a result of a lack of enforcement in the past to a point where renegade trails have all the sudden become acceptable. This needs to stop. Motorized use in the backcountry needs to be strongly discouraged and people who break the law need to be punished. The future of our outdoor experiences in Montana are counting on the Bitterroot NF's commitment to enforcement – I hope you will live up to this responsibility.

It may sound like I am pointing the finger at motorized use, but it is proven that the impacts of wheeled motor vehicles are the highest of all vessels that allow people to access our public lands. Wheeled vehicles cause erosion at levels much higher than other uses, impacting water quality and disturb wildlife and reduce habitat security. They are tools that we need to access and use our forests, but that use needs to be controlled in a responsible manner. Given declining budgets, there needs to be a responsible plan of where the money should go to ensure that the public has access, but also a responsibility of ensuring that a dilapidated road system does not remain open to a point that we can't keep a handle on the forest as an important resource and natural system.

I believe that if people want to have narrow track motorized trail riding experiences and if we have a declining budget, the forest should consider a roads to trails program, where redundant roads are changed to become motorized trails. Motor vehicles do not belong in the backcountry or inventoried roadless areas. Montanan's need to have backcountry areas where they can get away from the noise and the people and experience what this state is really about.

Finally, please see the below information on roads, motor vehicles, and big game hunting and habitat security. I ask that you review the most recent, peer reviewed information on the impacts motorized vehicles have on big game, fisheries, and water quality.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the future of a place that is very near to my heart, I appreciate the incorporation of my comments into the Bitterroot NF final travel management plan.

Respectfully,
Joel Webster
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Roads and Elk Habitat

Results from the Montana Elk Logging Study, 1975-1985, show that roads reduce big game use of adjacent habitat from the road edge to over 0.5 mile away. ³

Logging and road-building activity along major migration routes change the winter distribution of elk. ⁴

Elk in Montana avoid habitat adjacent to open forest roads, and road construction creates cumulative habitat loss that increases impacts to elk as road densities increase. ⁵

Roads are a major contributor to habitat fragmentation by dividing large landscapes into smaller patches and converting interior habitat into edge habitat. With increased habitat fragmentation across large areas, the populations of some species become isolated, increasing the risk of local

extirpations or extinctions. **6**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->National forestbackcountry areas accessible only by trail act as a barrier against noxiousinvasive plant and provide vital habitat and migration routes for many wildlifespecies, and are particularly important for those [like elk] requiring largehome ranges. **7**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->When many elkherds were located in inaccessible areas and elk harvests were below theirpotential in most states, construction of new roads was viewed as a positivecontribution to more intensive elk management. Now, however, timber harvest is greater on previously unroaded nationalforests, and the network of roads is a major wildlife management problem. **8**

Roads and Elk Vulnerability/Security

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->A west central Idaho study show elkoccur in greater densities in roadless area compared to roaded areas, andhunter success is higher in roadless areas compared to roaded areas. **9**

• <!--[endif]-->In another study,an expanding network of logging roads made elk more vulnerable to hunters andharassment, and higher road densities caused a reduction in the length andquality of the hunting season, loss of habitat, over harvest, and populationdecline. **10**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Logging roads makenearby elk herds more vulnerable to human interference year-round, not justduring hunting season. **11**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Poor elk securitycan result in re-distribution of elk from public lands to private lands duringthe hunting season, where the average hunter has no access or permission tohunt.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->One result ofroad construction is the decreased capacity of the habitat to support elk fromdecreased habitat effectiveness. In highly roaded areas in Montana, only 5% live to maturity. Road closures extend the number of mature bulls to 16% andextend their longevity to 7.5 years. **12**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Deer and elk in Colorado avoid roads, particularlyareas within 200 meters of a road. **13**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Travelrestrictions on roads appear to increase the capability of the area to hold elkin Montana. **14**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Road closuresallow elk to remain longer in preferred areas. **15**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Road closures inthe Tres Piedras area in New Mexicoduring big game season are generally accepted by the public and result inincreased elk harvest. **16**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Increased huntersuccess was found in unroaded areas (25%) and reduced open-road density areas(24%) than roaded areas (15%). **17**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Elk run away whenATVs passed within 2,000 yards but tolerate hikers within 500 feet, and thenonly walk away when hikers get closer. **18**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Road-relatedvariables have been implicated as increasing elk vulnerability in virtuallyevery study in which the influence of roads has been examined. Bull elk vulnerability is highest in areaswith open roads, reduced in areas with closed roads, and lowest in roadlessareas. **19**

Hunter Attitudes

A survey of hunters' attitudes toward roads in the NationalForests found: **20**

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->The majority ofhunters (65%) who hunt on national forests in 33 states report that gainingaccess to private hunting lands has become more difficult over the past 5years.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Most hunters(85%) support repairing and maintaining existing roads before building newroads on National Forest System lands.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Most hunters(83%) support keeping existing roadless areas in our national forests in theircurrent roadless state.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Deer and elk hunting in Montana have an economic value of \$360million to the state reported by the Montana Wildlife Federation, based on 1.2million hunter/days for deer and 900,000 hunter/days for elk.

The Message From Hunters And Anglers Today

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->The prevailingmessage from hunters and anglers is "Leave things as they are now. Don't build new roads into roadless areas,but make sure hunters and anglers have access to national forest lands androadless areas."

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->MontanaDepartment of Fish, Wildlife and Parks supports maintaining

existing roadless areas or designating them as wilderness to conserve them in perpetuity to provide fish and wildlife habitat security and quality, and to maintain the standard 5-week deer and elk hunting seasons.

Sources of Information

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[1]<!--[endif]--> **Compiled from:**
INFRA;jurisdiction FS, System NFSR, Status Existing
INFRA AnnualMaintenance Inventories
FY05 RoadAccomplishment Report

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